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POSTURE AND REST POSITIONS FOR EXPECTANT MOTHERS





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**POSTURE AND
REST POSITIONS FOR
EXPECTANT MOTHERS**

Health Programs Branch

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The Department of National Health and Welfare expresses its sincere thanks to those health workers across the country who gave so generously of their knowledge and experience in the preparation of this publication.

INTRODUCTION

This publication contains information for the pregnant woman, on good posture, ways to relax, comfort measures, breathing techniques, and muscle strengthening exercises. It is intended to be used primarily by nurses working with the expectant mother. The information can be used to assist her to maintain and improve her physical fitness during pregnancy, to carry her baby more comfortably, to prepare her to deliver her baby with satisfaction and with as little pain as possible, to help her regain her figure and to keep in good form afterward.

The material is addressed to the pregnant woman's husband also, so he and she can benefit by doing the exercises together during her pregnancy and he can be prepared to coach her at the time of labour and delivery.

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The contents of the publication are divided into four main sections –

I. POSTURE AND COMFORT MEASURES

II. REST AND RELAXATION

III. BREATHING TECHNIQUES FOR LABOUR AND DELIVERY

IV. POSTNATAL AND HOME EXERCISES

Although the booklet deals with only one aspect of care, the pregnant woman should know that good physical and mental health is made up of many interrelated factors, and that her total health care should be under medical supervision. It is important therefore, that she discuss the matter of physical activity and exercises with her doctor, and inquire about prenatal instruction in her community. In this way she will have a good knowledge of pregnancy and of the birth process and will be able to follow a program of health care best suited to her and her way of living.

**POSTURE AND
COMFORT MEASURES**

You will find that most of these suggestions relate to activities which are a part of your everyday living, whether you are working at home or outside. They are presented to remind you to practise them on a regular basis, and in a way to receive the greatest benefit from them, allowing for changes in your figure and your weight distribution as pregnancy advances.

Suggestions are designed to help –

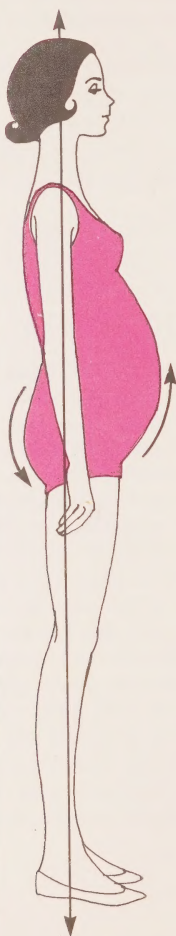
To prevent fatigue and undue muscle strain.

To conserve energy.

To prevent discomfort caused by incorrect body posture.

SOME GENERAL SUGGESTIONS

1. In your rest periods –
If you can sit, do so rather than stand.
If you can put your feet up, by all means do so.
If you can lie down, don't sit.
2. If possible, make your periods of activity of shorter duration. Making out a plan on paper ahead of time of what you must do will often decrease the running about for things that are forgotten.
3. Change your positions frequently. This will help circulation and prevent pressure on nerves thereby reducing unnecessary aches and pains.
4. Laughter is one of the best ways to reduce muscle tension.



STANDING

As your baby grows you will have an increasing tendency to lean backwards in order to achieve balance.

To adapt to this changing weight distribution –

- Keep the feet parallel but slightly apart.
- Keep knees straight but not locked.
- Arms at sides.
- Head erect, chin in.
- Tighten the abdominal wall, pulling in the buttocks, giving a natural curve to the back.

Low heeled shoes are recommended.

NOTE: *If you have to wait:*

Avoid standing if you can sit.

Walk rather than stand.

Place one foot in front of the other; shift body weight forward and backward from one foot to the other.

WALKING

You will be walking as usual in your daily work and play activities. Take enjoyable walks outdoors as often as possible; walk with a good stride, and try to expand the lungs.

To prevent sway back and muscle strain –

- Start from the correct standing position.
- Keep the back upright.
- Keep the head erect.

POSTURE

GETTING OUT OF BED

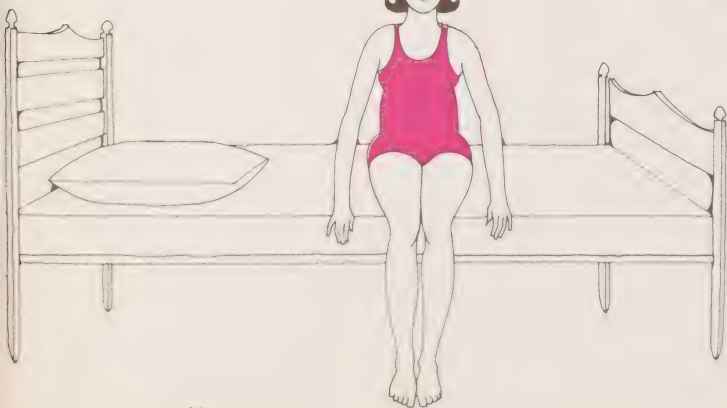
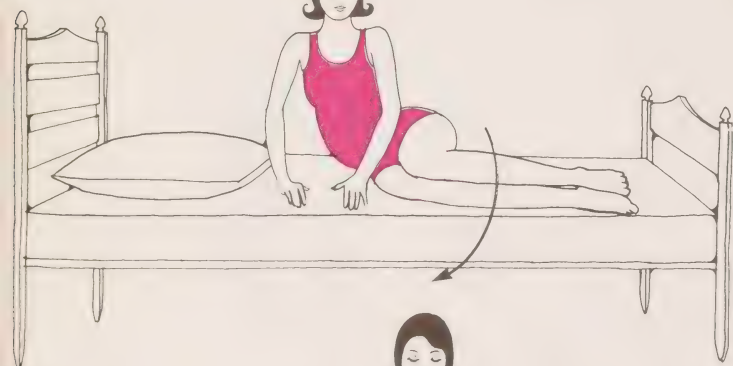
You can do this in a way that will prevent dizziness, which can occur with sudden changes of position.

- Roll over on your side with knees bent, turning shoulders and hips at the same time.
- Move to the edge of the bed.
- Push up with your arms and raise the upper part of your body.
- Swing your legs over the side of the bed.
- Pause a moment (sitting on side of bed) then stand.

(from a lying down position)

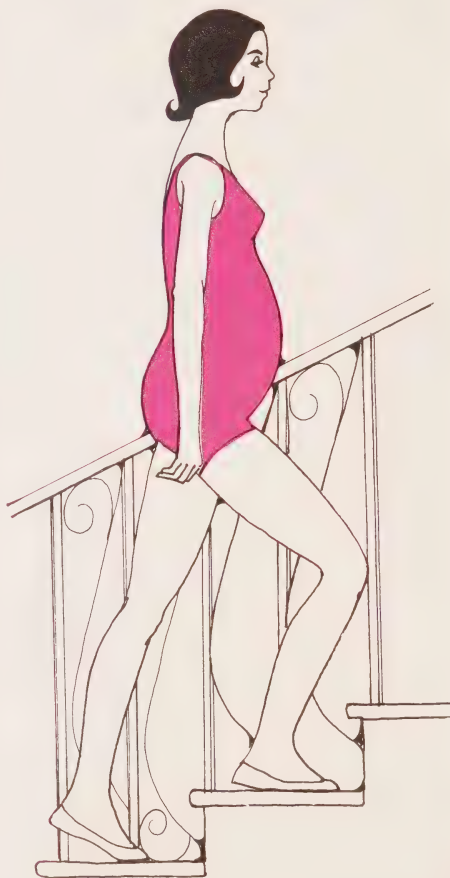
- Roll over on your side with knees bent.
- Push up with your arms and kneel (using arms to balance).
- Pause a moment (kneeling upright) then stand.

GETTING UP FROM THE FLOOR



CLIMBING STAIRS

- Plant whole foot firmly on step ahead and push off with the toe of your back foot (on the lower step).
- Clasp hand rail lightly for balance but not as a means of pulling yourself up the stairs.



LIFTING

To lift so as to prevent back strain and achieve balance –

- Face the object to be lifted.
- (a) Squat with your back straight keeping knees and feet well apart to leave room for your abdomen. (This uses your leg muscles to spare the small back muscles.)
- (b) As an alternate to squatting put one foot forward, kneel on other knee. Your front foot (flat on floor) used to lift rear foot (flexed at toes) will serve for pushing and will act as balance.

Grasp the object firmly and pull it in close to you; rise using your leg muscles, raise buttocks first and keep your back straight; avoid sudden jerking.





NOTE: Do not strain to reach or lift. *NEVER* bend from the waist, but rather bend and lower yourself slowly to the object you are lifting. Instead of lifting a toddler, support her as she climbs up on a footstool or step stool to your lap. Hug her close to you when getting up, rise using your leg muscles and keep your back straight.



SITTING

Sit in a way to prevent backache and induce rest.

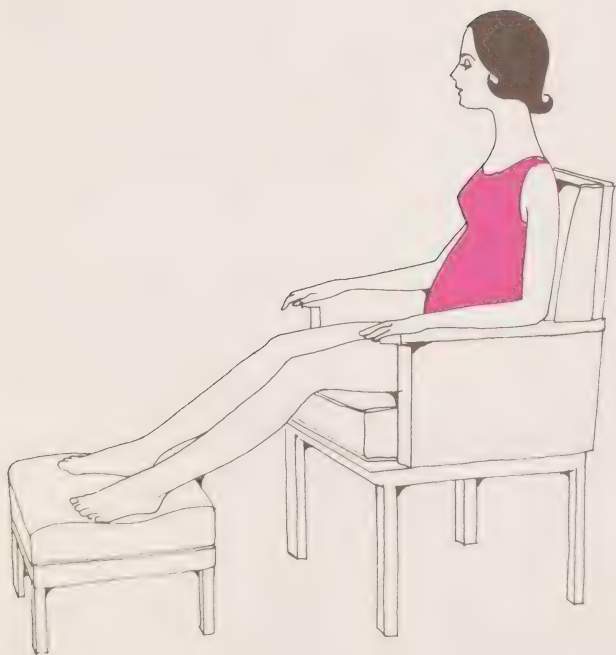
Make sure you are sitting in a good chair, one that has –

- A seat high enough to allow both feet to rest on the floor comfortably (if too high use a footstool).
- Deep enough to support the full length of the thigh.
- A back which will provide support.
- Arms high enough to support your arms.

TO SIT

- Step back until the back of your legs touches the seat of the chair.
- Keep your back straight, bend knees and use your leg muscles to lower onto the seat.
- Slide back in the chair, bending the body slightly forward to balance.
- Sit tall with weight evenly distributed; buttocks, back and shoulders should be supported by the back of the chair.
- Keep your arms on lap or chair arms.

NOTE: Try not to cross legs.



COMFORT MEASURES

TO RISE

- Slide forward to the edge of the chair and place one foot behind the other.
- Lift yourself by pushing with foot and using your leg muscles (use arms for support but not for pushing).
- Keep your back straight and avoid leaning forward.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HUSBAND

- Encourage your wife to maintain good posture at all times. You can pay attention to yours also.
- Poor posture is often associated with fatigue. Watch for signs of tiredness and encourage regular rest periods. It would also be helpful if you assisted with the heavier housework.
- Make sure that there is available a chair suitable for rest.

PELVIC ROCKING

NOTE: Not all authorities are promoting the use of this exercise, especially on all fours, so make a point to ask your doctor about it when you are discussing the physical activity aspect of your care.

This exercise –

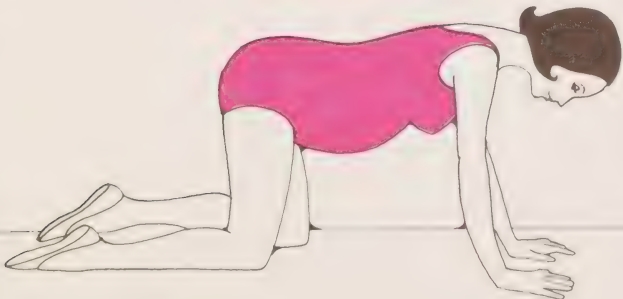
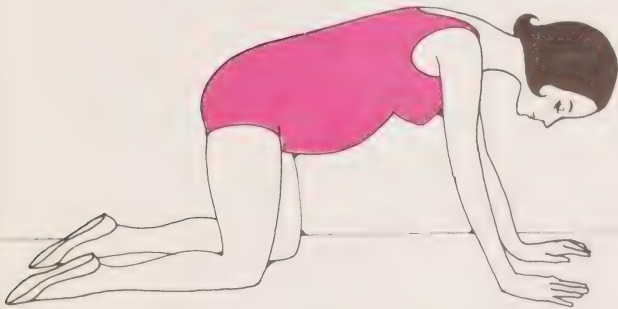
Relieves abdominal pressure.

Assists in strengthening abdominal muscles.

Helps prevent and/or relieve backache.

It can be done standing, sitting, lying down or on all fours:

- Tighten the muscles of the abdominal wall, pulling in and up and tuck in the buttocks; this rocks the pelvis up and flattens the lower back.
- Slowly relax the abdominal and buttock muscles. Do not accentuate curvature of your back; keep it natural.
- Repeat exercise 5 or 6 times, maintaining slow rhythmic motion.



CALF STRETCHING

Provides temporary relief from leg cramps.

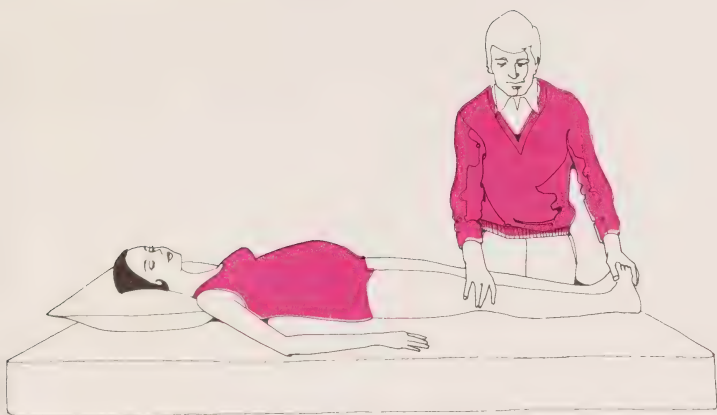
A. STANDING

- Place hands on a chair back, table or kitchen counter for support.
- Keeping foot flat on the floor, slide the foot of the cramped leg back as far as possible.
- Bend the other leg slightly.
- Return to beginning position and repeat the exercise several times.

B. LYING IN BED

For this exercise you will need assistance from someone.

- Straighten cramped leg.
- Have the person push down gently against your knee with one hand and push up against the sole of your foot with the other until the foot is at a sharp angle with the leg.
- Release and repeat several times.



REST AND RELAXATION

Rest and relaxation are important for good health at all times, but during pregnancy and labour they take on added importance. The exercises outlined can help –

To prevent fatigue

To provide rest periods for the muscles of the body.

To relieve body tensions which can cause muscle cramps and produce fatigue.

To promote physical and mental well-being.

Some general information

1. Relaxation is best achieved when the light and noise are reduced, the room temperature is comfortable and your clothes are loose.
2. Few people can relax without being taught. Your active participation is required.
3. There are many ways of producing relaxation, the best one is that which is most successful for you. If you can relax well using a method other than suggested in this publication, do not try to change.
4. If you learn to relax well during pregnancy you will be able to use it to maximum effect during labour. Tension during labour can cause discomfort and delay progress, whereas rest and relaxation will lessen fatigue, and encourage an attitude of mind which enables you to cope with the demands made upon you, thus aiding progress in labour.
5. Alternate periods of activity with periods of rest; this will prevent tiring.
6. Include at least one period of complete relaxation every day (put your feet up and have a nap).
7. If you are working, make the best use of rest opportunities (coffee and lunch breaks) and also have a period of complete relaxation between work activities and any other commitments.

REDUCING TENSION IN ORDER TO BECOME RELAXED

- Position yourself comfortably in a sitting or lying down position, all parts of your body supported, joints slightly flexed.
- Close eyes and breathe as described in *Breath Control*, page 28.
- Concentrate on tightening groups of muscles and recognize the feeling of tension, then deliberately loosen the muscles until they feel heavy. (e.g. right leg and foot, left leg and foot, right arm and hand, left arm and hand, buttocks and thighs together, abdomen, shoulders and chest, neck and head, face.)
- Relax areas of tension as you breathe out.
- When you are completely relaxed your jaw will drop and your lips part, and you will have a sensation of heaviness. Don't worry about your appearance, as this will create tension.
- When you are excited or under pressure, notice areas of tension and practise relaxation. Once you know how to relax it can be practised anywhere at any time.

POSITIONS FOR RELAXATION

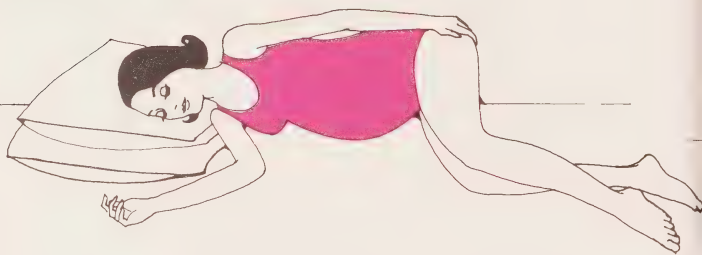
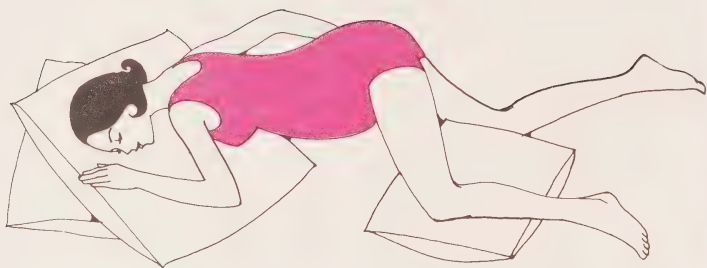
Each of the following positions can be used for relaxation. It is advisable to practise in each of the positions. Once relaxation can be achieved in all of them try to relax in any other rest position you may be in during the day. For example sitting at the office or in a car or bus. The three positions described are commonly used during labour.

LYING ON BACK

This is most comfortable in early pregnancy but may cause some faintness in late pregnancy because of pressure from the weight of the baby.

- Support your head on a pillow. Two can be used if they give greater comfort. If using two, place the top pillow lengthwise to support shoulders.
- Place a soft pillow or folded blanket under your thighs to help keep the knees flexed for greater relaxation.
- Let your legs and feet roll outward.
- Bend your elbows slightly and place hands on thighs or on the bed.





LYING ON SIDE

These positions are more comfortable in the later part of pregnancy and during labour.

Position 1

- Lie on most comfortable side.
- Place lower arm behind your back and rest it on mattress behind you in slightly bent position.
- With free hand, position pillow diagonally, have lower breast on mattress, head and upper breast on pillow; a second pillow placed horizontally under the first pillow may be needed for more comfort.
- Move upper leg forward to lie slightly bent on mattress in front of you; use a pillow to support leg if it increases back or abdominal comfort.
- Place small pillow or folded blanket under your abdomen (not shown) if necessary, to reduce pull on abdominal muscles.

Position 2

- Place the pillow so that it supports the head.
- Bend both knees and keep together.
- Bend lower arm in front of body and allow upper arm to rest on hip.
- Use pillow to support abdomen, if uncomfortable. (not shown)
- If lower arm gets numb, place a pillow behind the back and rest against its support.

TO RELAX AT A DESK OR TABLE

- Place folded arms on desk.
- Lower head to rest on arms.
- Keep legs uncrossed.

BREATH CONTROL

Not only is correct posture necessary for relaxation, but also is controlled breathing; it is one of the easiest and best ways to relax.

It will help –

To maintain good circulation.

To aid in relaxation.

To promote feeling of well-being.

- Breathe in deeply through nose.
- Hiss slowly through mouth.
- Breathe quietly, easily and rhythmically.
- Let yourself go completely limp.

NOTE: You will begin to feel heavy and exertion will be difficult. If you wish to sleep it will come and may be preceded by a floating sensation.



DIAGRAMMATIC BREATH PATTERN

1 Complete breath

2 Slow rhythmic breathing

SECTION III

BREATHING TECHNIQUES FOR LABOUR AND DELIVERY

SUGGESTIONS FOR HUSBAND

All of this group of exercises would be of value to you. Why not practise them with your wife? Become familiar with them so that you can encourage relaxation during labour and delivery. Gently stroking or massaging areas of tension (neck, shoulders, back) can aid your wife to relax.

Some general information

Labour occurs in three stages. – The first stage usually begins with mild contractions. As the contractions gradually become longer, stronger and closer together the cervix becomes softer and thins out, stretching open to its full capacity. This is the longest stage, the waiting period. Your job is to relax with the contractions and rest between them.

The second stage, often referred to as the working stage, is much shorter and begins when the cervix is completely open, allowing the baby to be pushed through it, through the vagina (birth canal) and ends with the birth of the child. It is an active stage for you, working hard to push the baby through the vagina and out into the world.

The third stage of labour is very brief. During this stage, the placenta (afterbirth), the cord and the bag which held the baby and water are pushed out by contractions.

During labour, the uterus contracts in much the same way as any other muscle in your body but in such a way as to pull the cervix open, over the baby's head. Unlike the muscles in your arms and legs you have no control over uterine contractions. At the beginning of labour, contractions are widely spaced and quite short (for example 10-20 minutes apart and lasting about 20 seconds). As labour progresses, the contractions get closer together and last longer, until just before delivery they can be two minutes or less apart and last up to 60 seconds. In other words, labour as the name implies, means that your uterine muscles are working hard and you are using a lot of energy. Therefore, in order to save as much energy as possible, you should relax and rest whenever you can. Relaxation becomes difficult. You will probably find these contractions easier to deal with if you have learned the different techniques of relaxation and breath control (SECTION II) and can carry them out when you are in labour.

You will find your breathing rhythms change during the contractions of labour. Remember you want to stay as relaxed as possible, and holding your breath increases tension. The following breathing techniques are suggested as one method of preventing tension during contractions and assisting you to relax.

In the same way that relaxation has to be learned these techniques also have to be practised during pregnancy. You can do them in both the sitting and lying down positions. Pretend that you are having a contraction lasting 30-45 seconds.

A. As contractions become longer and stronger you will probably feel yourself becoming tense. Usually the following deep controlled breathing is helpful.

- Breathe in deeply and hiss out slowly as the contraction begins.
- Make each of the next four to five breaths a little shallower until you are breathing lightly.
- Continue to breathe lightly until you feel the contraction begin to go.
- Make each of the next four to five breaths increasingly deeper.
- Breathe in deeply and hiss out slowly.
- Relax, breathing in a relaxed manner, between contractions.



BREATHING TECHNIQUES

B. Once you have had practice and feel comfortable with the breathing technique suggested previously, you can add the following exercise –

- As you take the first deep breath in, relax the abdominal wall. If you are really relaxed, the abdomen should rise.
- If the abdominal wall is relaxed throughout the contraction, your abdomen will move slightly with your light breathing.
- As you take the deep breath at the end of the contraction your abdomen will fall.
- Continue with relaxation breathing.

This type of breathing will lessen the discomfort caused by tight abdominal muscles pushing against the contracting uterus.

NOTE: Toward the end of the first stage you may feel like holding your breath or even pushing during strong contractions. To prevent this, breathe as above, but during the light breath, puff out gently every 3rd or 4th breath. Remember – PUFF out, don't blow out.

CONTROLLED PUSHING

In the second stage of labour you will actively help by pushing. When practising **DO NOT PUSH** as this should not be done until the cervix is open. You should be aware of this technique and be prepared for carrying it out at the time of delivery. Then, when you feel the urge to push and are asked to do so by your attendant –

- At the beginning of each contraction, breathe in deeply and hiss out.
- During the contraction, breathe in quickly, deeply, hold your breath, raise your head and push.
- If you can't hold your breath comfortably, take further quick breaths as required, hold and continue to push throughout the contraction.
- As the contraction ends, breathe in slowly, deeply, hiss out slowly, and with relief; relax until next contraction begins.

To practise this breathing, pretend you are having contractions lasting 60-65 seconds. Lie on your back, head and shoulders elevated. Bend knees. Separate legs. **DO NOT PUSH.**

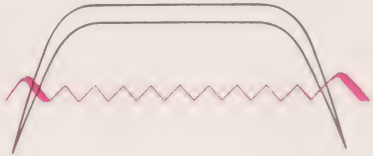


PANTING

Toward the end of the second stage of labour you may be asked to stop pushing (even though you feel you want to push) during a contraction; this is so the baby will arrive gently –

- Breathe in and out very quickly, mouth open (like a panting dog).
- As the contraction ends, breathe in slowly and deeply, hiss out slowly.
- Relax until the next contraction begins.

To practise this breathing, pretend you are pushing and that you are asked to stop. Never practise longer than a few seconds to prevent a light-headed feeling.



THIRD STAGE BREATHING

Breathe as directed. You may be asked to breathe deeply, shallowly, to pant a little, push a little, as the third stage progresses.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HUSBAND

Encourage your wife to practise these breathing techniques during pregnancy. In practice sessions you can indicate when a contraction is starting by grasping your wife's arm and releasing it when the contraction finishes. Commence with 30 second contractions (use a watch to time them) and over a period of days or even weeks increase until they indicate 60 second contractions.

When your wife is in labour you can provide not only practical assistance but, if prepared, great emotional support. Rubbing your wife's back during labour can be very comforting. With your wife on her side –

- Place your hand on her back just above the cleft of the buttocks.
- Press firmly with the palm of the hand against the bony area at the base of the spine. This may be sufficient to bring comfort.
- Keeping the pressure firm, rotate the palm of the hand in a small circular movement. Put powder or oil on your hand to prevent the skin from getting sore with the friction.
- Try to be relaxed yourself.

If you are with your wife during labour, or during labour and delivery, you can act as her coach; watch for signs of tension, assist her to assume the positions she practised for labour. Time her contractions and remind her to begin her breathing techniques and coach her through each contraction.

When your baby is born, you will share with her the joy of being together at the birth of your baby.

The return of your reproductive organs to the pre-pregnant state will occur naturally. You can help your body by doing exercises –

To increase muscle tone.

To improve circulation.

To help the healing process.

Some general suggestions

While in the hospital, check with your doctor before doing any of the exercises suggested. He will tell you at what time after delivery you should start. He may want you to take a slower pace or even to leave out some exercises.

You will commence simple exercises in the hospital under supervision. Start gently, easily, gradually increasing the frequency and strength of the exercises as your body regains its vigor.

When you return home incorporate them into your daily activities. It is wise to do a few simple exercises every day rather than attempt a vigorous program which you will stop after a few days.

Continue to maintain good posture when standing, walking and sitting. Remember you no longer have to balance the weight of the baby.

Avoid strenuous activity in the first few weeks. Enjoy your baby and forget unnecessary housework.

Work efficiently (plan ahead) and you will save yourself in effort and energy. This is important when you are getting used to the baby's routine.

Try to have one period of complete rest during the day if possible. Certainly have frequent restful periods.

GETTING UP

After delivery, as directed by your doctor, you will be able to get up for brief periods to move about and go to the bathroom.

Use the rising technique of pregnancy (page 11) for your comfort and to prevent dizziness.

When you are walking or standing, use the correct posture (page 8). Remember your muscles and joint structures need time to readjust and correct posture avoids strain and pain.

TO CORRECT POSTURE

Lying on back with knees bent –

- Tighten stomach muscles.
- Tighten buttocks.
- Push small of back into mat or other firm surface you are lying on.
- Hold for count of five
- Relax

Repeat 10 times

TO STRENGTHEN PELVIC FLOOR

Standing, lying or sitting –

- Tighten buttocks and abdominal muscles.
- Press thighs together.
- Hold for count of five.
- Relax
- Pull up on pelvic floor.

Repeat 10 times

This exercise can be done while you are doing your daily work in standing, sitting or lying positions; can also be done when you are urinating – stop stream once or twice. This exercise should be continued for years.

